EXODUS 20:1-11
EPHESIANS 6:1-4
JOHN 13:35

THE FAMILY UNDER SIEGE

MAY 12, 1974
BETHANY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
LAFAYETTE, INDIANA
JOHN M. BUCHANAN

Several years ago the Beatles were doing a song that became very popular entitled "She's Leaving Home." It was difficult, but if you listened carefully you could hear the story of a teen-age girl who got up one morning at 5:00 A.M., packed her bag and left. The parental reaction to her leaving is stereotyped:

"We gave her most of her lives.
We gave her everything money could buy
We never thought of ourselves
We struggled hard all our lives to get by."

The social comment comes in the last stanza of the song:

What did we do that was wrong?
She....is having fun
.... the one thing money can't buy.
Something inside
that was always denied
For so many years
Bye, Bye"

Now, I'm not at all certain about the veracity of the punch-line, namely that fun is the one thing money can't buy. Nevertheless, the song was very popular because it dealt with something that was happening. A lot of young people were simply packing up and leaving. Not the ordinary run-a-ways: but an alarming number of young people. Enough so that the establishment of hostels, places for them to live, and agencies to provide job opportunities and counseling became an urgent priority in the social service structures of all our major cities. It seemed, in the middle and late sixties, that the American Home, that most venerable of institutions, was coming apart at the seams.

In a real sense we are still dealing with that deep cultural pheno-

menon: the meaning of home and family is no longer rooted in the safe traditions of the past, but rather is in the midst of profound and radical change. Historians ans Sociologists will one day look back on the decades of the sixties and seventies as the time when, for better or worse, the family unit underwent tremendous stress. Time alone will tell whether the family emerged as a strengthened unit - or fatally wounded. The jury is still out.

In the meantime people who care about the family - and that includes, I would guess, all of us, are bombarded with more data, more books, pamphlets and advice than we can handle. A lot of guilt is in the air: parents are coming to the conclusion that they are alone responsible for what's happening. Margaret Meade observes that no generation of teen-agers ever thought their parents were doing a good job: this generation of parents in the first to agree.

All of which makes it rather precarious to preach a Mother's Day sermon that applauds motherhood in general: or a family oriented sermon that simply dredges up all the sentimental over simplifications that sounded good yesterday, but are today irrelevant. And yet, this is Mother's Day: this is Family Week: this is a congregation that has traditionally seen its mission in terms of dealing with families. And so, let us look.....

The Bible is astonishingly frank about the family. If you're looking for something simple and rosy, it's far better to read a book of Norman Vincent Peale sermons than the Bible.

Consider - the Adam and Eve narrative: the primal family which results in a disaster. The man and woman contribute to each other's moral downfall: one of their son's murders the other.

Noah was discovered in a drunken stupor by his sons and cursed one of them. Abraham - father of the faith, loaned his wife to Pharoh in order to buy a little time in Egypt. After a period of tension between

the mothers of his children, Abraham came precariously close to killing his son Issac as an offering to God.

Jacob deceived his father, alienated his brother, played his parents off against each other - and his sons lift their brother Joseph in the desert to die.

David committed adultry and arranged for a murder to cover his tracks. His son Solomon was known for his great wisdom - he had 700 wives.

The New Testament is every bit as honest. Apparently Jesus chose not to marry, and he said some things that stop us in our tracks: like his way setting father against son, and mother against daughter.

Paul, several decades later, remained a bachelor, and suggested that Christians ought to marry only if they could not control their passion. In fairness, let it be said that Paul moderated that later in his life.

This is not to say that the Bible is anti marriage and family and unconcerned about the home. The sixth commandment elevates the relationship between parents and children to the highest ethical plain. One of the last things Jesus said, let us remember, had to do with providing for his mother. When he called God "Father", and taught his disciples to do the same he was certainly using his own experience in a home as a model which everyone would understand. The Bible is simply very realistic about families: it takes seriously the frustrations and pitfalls. It does not, as we are inclined to do, hold up the family as something inherently sacred and holy. Rather the Bible portrays the family as a matrix of relationships that can be powerfully creative or powerfully destructive. Families, in the Bible, can be holy - or demonic. Which suggests that contemporary Christians ought to stop assuming that a family in which all the members go to Church is automatically a good and Christian home, and begin to examine, with the greatest care, the tensions and problems that are particular to our age, and to deal with them honestly

and lovingly.

I believe that there are three major tensions particular to the family matrix today. I am sure you know what they are: let's touch each one briefly and see how they intersect.

The first is the emergence in our generation of a new model called the "Nuclear Family": Father, Mother, children, period. Urbanization and mobility have totally destroyed for most people, a structure that has been common to mankind from the beginning - namely, the extended family that includes Grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. When you talk about the traditional family - you are talking about this extended variety, and not the compact, single unit called the nuclear family. Margaret Meade calls that a new invention and a bad one. Suddenly, in our time, all the weight that had been shared before by a small community of people fell squarely on the shoulders of two individuals - a mother and a father - who, in turn - more often than not - found themselves living in a new and strange community.

Several illustrations: - when Mary and Elizabeth found themselves pregnant they got together and shared what it meant to them. They were kinswomen - relatives. That's a function of an extended family. A young wife today may have no one with whom to share - except her husband.

When I was a boy, one of the Buchanan cousins was a little rambunctious: not bad, just very lively. And when his own father couldn't deal with the situation it fell to my father or my grandfather to take him aside for a little chat. That's a function of an extended family: parenting is, many times, shared or at least supported by others.

Alistaire Cooke, in his excellent book <u>America</u>, discusses the unique role played in our history by the frontier mother: pillar of strength, courage and piety: the one who brought gentleness and culture to the wilderness. But, Cooke ,is honest enough to add, the one - who in alarming numbers went mad - because of the enforced isolation and the

necessity of holding a family together apart from that extended model out of which she, herself, had come.

In any case, that is where we are, and it is important to know it and to deal with it. At the same time two other tensions are afflicting the family.

Alone, dependent only on each other, the contemporary family is afflicted with a plague of busyness that I am prepared now to call lunatic even though I am part of it and contribute to it.

There simply are no times, except on vacation, when families simply allow themselves to be. We are so obsessed with busyness and activity that parents are fortunate if they see their children for more than ten minutes at a time. Good and meaningful relationships aren't about to develop when the only time the family is together is a meal hurriedly squeezed in between the after school activity and the evening activity. Parents must bear the burden of allowing that to happen - for throwing out the bait. And other institutions, primarily the Public Schools, must also share part of it - the part that makes normative an extra-curricular schedule so demanding that an adolescent feels like a social outcast if he or she isn't spending twelve hours a day at school.

The third tension is a product of that discovery made rather recently that women are persons: that while the old model which cast women in the role of mothers - and men as protectors and providers worked in an agrarian society, it is no longer working very well. For the fact is that in an urban, technological culture - women became parents - and men professionals. The United Church of Canada recently published a report that observed that the average housewife works 99.6 hours a week at her job, and that if she were paid at current wage rates for her services as Nursemaid, dietitian, food buyer, housekeeper, gardener, chauffer and cook her yearly income would be well over $20,000 a year.

That needs saying, and Women's Liberation has said it. In addition

it needs to be affirmed clearly that there are no sexual distinctions when it comes to intellectual and professional competence. But the more frantic fringes of the movement said something else - namely that motherhood is essentially a drag: something to do only if you can't do anything else. Langdon Gilkey, a theologian at the University of Chicago observes (Naming the Whirlwind P.338) that the extremist variety of the movement ends up selling out to the very male mentality from which it wants to be liberated. The meaning and worth of individuals is not established in the market place, Gilkey observes. That idea - that success model - is the idolatry of our age, from which men and women both need liberated. Meaning and integrity and worth come from within: they are given to us as gifts by others - by those who matter most to us: they cannot be earned: they are not won in the battle of life.

In any case, added to the emergence of the nuclear family and the plague of busyness - there is today, the vague suspicion that it's not really very important to be a mother.

Now, what does the person do - who knows all that and wants to deal with it?

I think some answers are abvious. Find an extended family - you can't go it alone. Do something about your frantic schedule. Don't allow your life to be determined by forces over which you have no control. Husbands - become parents again: do the dishes - keep the children: be sensitive to the fact that while your 50 hour work week is driving you to distraction, your wife is putting in twice as many hours as you. Laugh at Archie Bunker when he orders Edith to bring a beer - but if you love your mate don't do it.

Beyond that I think all of us need to be consciously aware that being families today is more demanding than ever before. One commentator put it this way: "It is the height of irony that for all our society's compulsiveness about expertise in every field, marriage and the raising

of children is one of the last areas we blithely entrust to abject amateurs." Help and support is available: an excellent program called "Parent Effectiveness Training" is going on in this Church right now. And there are people in the community whose job it is to assist - not just in cases of seven ruptures - but in situations when families simply want their relationships to be more creative and life giving.

I believe that the family - rather than decreasing in significance is more important today than at any time in history. I believe that the family may be the last bastion of healing, humanizing, affirming human relationships in a culture that seems bent on becoming depersonalized. And I believe, finally, that the greatest resource you and I have going for us, is a reality basic in our faith as Christians - namely Grace. I believe that the intimacy of family relationships is the place where Grace can happen in our lives.

The Grace of God is his unmented love for us given in Jesus Christ. We don't earn God's love: we don't deserve his approval: he has given it. And our highest calling as Christians is to convey that Grace in relationships with others. Jesus called it a new commandment: "Love each other."

My suggestion is a rather simple one, really. Namely, that we see our families as the place we are first called to love each other - to be graceful. In our relationships with each other, husbands - wives - children - we have opportunities daily to affirm another human being: to tell another person that he or she matters: that he or she is OK: that our love and appreciation and approval is contingent on nothing. In the complex of relationships that is called a family we have daily opportunity to forgive and accept and trust.

Most of what Jesus talked about as life-giving - life affirming - can happen best, I believe, in families: things like loving human beings into secure, confident persons: providing the trust necessary while one learns how to make decisions: being there when life tumbles in and the

most urgent priority is the safety in which to cry or be angry.

I would conclude by sharing with you several paragraphs of an essay I read recently: it was written by Ross Snyder, a man who has given his life to study and teaching how to be total and free human beings.

"A family is a group of people who actively approve of each other. To be sure, there are arguments and conflicts going on. But nevertheless there is delight in each other.....

You are fundamentally sure that the rest of the family are on your side: they are for you.

A prevailing atmosphere of blaming and of suspicion that the others feel that you are not what you ought to be ....is not a family climate

A family is a center of healing... a place where you can be real. You can drop your stuffed shirt and false front. The family knows you as you really are... and they're still for you..

A family is an association of growers - a power center - where biology becomes love - a communicated experience.

All this is possible only when a family is looking together in the same direction...toward God. For love and creativeness come not from merely looking at each other, but looking together toward a greater - than - any - of - us.

This is the enduring silhouete of a real family." (Alive Now, May/ June '74, P.61-62) AMEN

Father, help us to affirm and love each other - even as you have loved and affirmed us. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN